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Journeying Through South America

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Chapter 1

Journeying through South America

By Julius Amin

Abstract: The Global Education Seminar offered opportunities to faculty to experience life in another culture with hopes of returning to campus to educate colleagues and students. This article argues that travels to Argentina and Peru accomplished some of that objective. Among the educational aspects, the experience addresses the question: “what does it mean to be black in those countries?” The conclusion was revealing in several ways, and among them was that racism was displayed in different ways in different societies. Additionally, the experience helped to reinforce the differences between cultural immersion and tourism. In the end the experience enriched participants’ knowledge and ability to promote global and intercultural conversations on campus.

Mangos Café Restaurant located off the Pacific coast in Lima lived up to its reputation. The buffet had a wide sampling of Peruvian cuisine. It was a good place to hang out. The waiter who came to our table was friendly, courteous, and inquisitive. After serving drinks he anchored at our end of the table for the typical “how do you” chit chat. It was a little windy and chilly that evening but a few glasses of *Pisco* and other local brew eased the feeling. Later the waiter returned for a longer conversation. “Where are you from,” he asked. “I am from Cameroon originally but live in Ohio,” I said. I will answer this same question many times in South America. I asked him to recommend the best local dish on the menu. He was nice to his employer stating that everything was delicious. He was right. By now we were talking as if we had known each other for some time. Ernesto Velasquez, my colleague and translator, was at the top of his game. When my new friend said something about Chinchu, I had a much-needed opening to talk about Afro-Peruvians. He was genuine and appreciative. “You do not see many black people around here...they are in Chinchu,” he said. Black people have great culture, music, dance, food, he added. “I went there and fell in love three times,” he continued. After our meal we said goodbye to each other. His jokes entertained us. As we departed I turned and looked at

him one more time knowing that our paths may never cross again. Back in Dayton Miguel Angel Pinto of the *Universidad San Ignacio de Loyala* e-mailed to me a link on the celebration of the Afro-Peruvian culture day. In truth, conversations with the waiter, communication with Pinto, bus rides in urban centers, making sense of graffiti scrawled on buildings, and many others are what make the difference in foreign travel. Little things do matter. This chapter attempts to capture those moments which made my participation in the Global Education Seminar (GES)—South America worth it. It is a memoir of my stay in Argentina and Peru.

In spring 2012 my proposal was approved for the University of Dayton (UD) GES participation. Global Education Seminar (GES)—South America. Over the course of the 2012-2013 academic year I participated in the orientation, and later spent three weeks in the nations of Argentina and Peru. By every qualitative and quantitative measurement it was a remarkable experience and an opportunity for deeper understanding.

The goals of the Global Seminar are consistent with Student Learning Goals and Outcomes stipulated in the Common Academic Program (CAP), the new General Education Program at UD. During the past five years several University policy papers emphasized diversity and internationalization. Unlike previous documents CAP challenged faculty to move aggressively to integrate the University's Mission into their teaching. Every faculty member at the institution must work towards instilling in students the following seven Goals and Outcomes: Scholarship, Faith Traditions, Diversity, Community, Practical Wisdom, Critical Examination of our Times, and Vocation. The Humanities Commons, a key component of CAP, stipulates that each course within that domain must address the Diversity Goal and Outcome: "*All undergraduates will develop and demonstrate intellectually informed, appreciative, and critical understanding of the cultures, histories, times, and places of multiple others, as marked by class,*

race, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, and other manifestations of difference. Students' understanding will reflect scholarly inquiry, experiential immersion, and disciplined reflection." In short, CAP mandates faculty to prepare students for life in a diverse global environment. The GES program is therefore consistent with CAP, more especially as it challenges faculty to develop an international awareness. It calls on faculty to think differently as they deliver lectures in an increasingly multicultural campus. The Seminar succeeded in that effort. The experience in Argentina and Peru enhanced my ability to deliver my history courses in a variety of ways. During the trip I encountered issues of race, community, class, power, wealth, and poverty. My time in those countries was well-spent.

Given the significance of race and internationalization on UD campus my contribution will dwell mostly on those issues while pointing to the transformative nature of the experience.

My interest in South America dates back to graduate school when the region was a sub-field in my doctorate program. It had several similarities with Africa thereby offering a useful opportunity for comparative analysis. Like Africa, South America is complex and provides avenues for immense comparisons. Nations in both continents were colonized by Europeans yet development has taken different paths. In terms of population South America is diverse and the people are descendants of Europeans, Africans, Indians, and a mixture of all. In terms of wealth it is a region of extremities. There is immense wealth and extreme poverty. For example, Argentina with a population of 40 million people is mostly European; has a strong economy, and in 2008 had a per capita income of \$7,200. It has always maintained a great soccer tradition. Whereas Peru with a population of 29 million, mostly people of Indian descent, is among the five poorest nations in the hemisphere, and in 2008 had a per capita income of \$3,990. In later years

my interest in South America evaporated because of inadequate language skills to pursue meaningful research in the region. But GES offered other opportunities to engage the region.

Decoding the Racial Divide

In the Global Seminar proposal I underscored my objective to understand race within the South American context. I took that message to the orientation. My goal was to find out: “What does it mean to be me in Argentina and Peru?” “What does it mean to be black in those two countries?”

In 1903 WEB Du Bois postulated the “double-consciousness” theory to explain the black person’s dilemma in America. “One ever feels his two-ness,---an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder,” he wrote. Du Bois’s analysis remains as valid today as it was when he penned it, and helps to explain the black person’s burden in the US. To what extent was the double-consciousness concept valid in South America?

My first observation of Buenos Aires was the nearly complete absence of black people. During my one week there I counted eight black people, and of that number two were African-Americans visiting, one a businessman of Cameroonian descent, and another a Senegalese merchant. The other four I did not meet. It was surprising that in an international city the size of Buenos Aires so few blacks were to be seen. As we moved from site to site, school to school, and office to office it became clear that race, like in the US, is a difficult and an uncomfortable topic to discuss. When the topic came up the conversation almost invariably shifted to the issue of immigration, and specifically immigrants from Paraguay, Bolivia, and other migrants to Argentina to obtain “free education and social services.” They were the “slum” dwellers, and were viewed with disdain by many of European descent. They were different and had a darker

complexion. Racism appears in many forms. Labels of “slums,” “different,” “other,” and so on are coded words for racism.

At the *Colegio Marianista*, an affluent school, we learned about the institution’s goal to internationalize the curriculum. However, when I raised the issue of how the history of Africa is taught within the new curriculum the attention shifted to immigrants. Despite this, there were admirable things about students at the school. Though privileged, they seem aware of their civic obligations. They explained that the plight of the poor was inextricably tied to their continuous development. They accepted the notion that development has to be total in order for progress to take place at the national level. They took service learning seriously. It was impressive to hear them articulate those views.

We also visited a low income school in Barracas. The school catered to immigrants from neighboring nations. The student body was made up of both traditional and non-traditional students. Some of the students were single parents. It was here that José Luis Perico, our in-country coordinator, taught English. It was here after visiting the school that I developed new appreciation for the work Perico did. He was passionate about his work and showed genuine interest in the life of the students. He knew their family situation and counseled them on a variety of personal issues. There was evidence of trust between him and the students. They had forged a learning community which responded to the needs of the community. An example of solidarity was when they invited us to partake in the ritual of *mate’*. *Mate’* is a drink made from dried leaves served with a straw, and everyone uses the same straw. It was passed from one person to the other. It looked simple but had its own rules. If someone who partook says “thank you” the drink didn’t return to him or her. The experience reminded me of a tradition in many West

African nations where friends and community people generally ate from the same bowl. It was a sign of friendship. I felt right at home with *mate*. I will remember that experience.

But there was more. Barracas reminded me of my childhood. I grew up in a community which was materially poor but had a lot of “soul.” In Argentina neighborhoods such as Barracas are popularly referred as the “Slum.” But a closer examination at the school in that community revealed students who cared for each other and had aspirations typical of students everywhere. When we arrived at the site students were playing volleyball on a makeshift court. They were doing the best with the best they had and it worked for them. In conversations they informed us of their dreams to become doctors, teachers, engineers, professional soccer players, and lawyers. It was a reminder that irrespective of one’s economic class, human beings everywhere have the same basic needs and goals to do better. John F. Kennedy said: “The pressures of life are not always distributed by choice.” The young people in Baraccas did not choose to be poor or live in a shanty town. And like everyone they hoped for better days ahead. It was refreshing to see their courage and appreciation for little things.

On the way from Barracas I went through an unusual experience. As I stood talking with a UD colleague four very young children stopped and for the next several minutes basically stared at me. It was different from the stares I experience in parts of the US. This one was up close, undisguised, and continuous. It was unsettling. I tried to talk to them but was handicapped by my inability to communicate effectively in Spanish. The kids neither understood French nor English, both languages which I speak. There was no conversation among us. After a while we walked away as I reflected on what had just happened. These kids, I am convinced, had never seen a black person in real life. I wondered what they must have been thinking. As we departed I

turned and looked at them one more time. I may never go down that road again but that brief encounter may forever be etched in my memory.

The issue of race continued to be important among my discussion topics at other schools. At the *Pontificia Universidad Catolica Argentina* (UCA) I had the opportunity to speak with faculty on the subject. Located in an exclusive neighborhood in Buenos Aires, UCA is a superb structure at a superb site. There we listened to a presentation on the sources of social and urban decay. Led by Drs. Ana Lordes Suarez and Ann Mitchell, the project was thoughtful, and the conclusions based on quantitative analysis. They allowed for questions. Also present was the University's director of the Office of International Relations and Academic Cooperation, Maria Soledad Zapiola. We had a great exchange of ideas. Soledad's bilingualism reinforced the importance of language in the twenty-first century. She moved easily in both English and Spanish. There was praise for Afro-Peruvian culture but artwork on walls in buildings at the University did not reflect that. I did not notice people of indigenous or African descent among the students. It was the typical story at many of the affluent schools. I asked if they were any programs about Africa but the response was inadequate. As we left I wondered what students at the school are taught about slavery and colonization of Africa. No study of the contemporary world can ignore the global impact of those historical forces.

One of those I met in Buenos Aires was Bille Victor, a businessman of Cameroonian descent. Bille has lived in Argentina for twenty-five years. "How did you end up here," I asked. We delved into the topic of race. Initially it was a challenge for him: "They were times I went for weeks, and even months without seeing another black man," he said. He arrived in the country as a soccer player, and when the contract ended he went to the University of Buenos Aires, later

married an Argentinian woman, and as we say in my business “the rest is history.” We discussed extensively the race question comparing notes of his experience in Argentina to mine in the US.

As our plane taxied off the runway in Buenos Aires I knew I had enjoyed my time in that country. I gained new knowledge, new friends, new perspectives, and discovered things about myself which I had not known. It was a successful experience.

As in Argentina, I took my race questions to Peru. Peru was different, fascinating, more enjoying and diversified. People of Indian descent make up a majority of the population, and ten percent of the country’s people are blacks. Yet, the power and economic structure remains in the hands of a tiny group of individuals of European descent. Those systems marginalize blacks and Indians. Blacks are invisible in the major urban centers of Lima and Cusco. I visited the University of San Marcos. Created in 1551, it is the oldest university in South America. There I met Norman V. Gonzalez, professor of social work, who stated the university had a size of 50,000 students and 3000 faculty. I could not identify a single black student or faculty during the two hours I spent on campus. College campuses reflect society’s values. The absence of blacks at San Marcos was representative of their exclusion from mainstream society.

At the *Santa Maria* school I participated on a panel discussion on the topic of bullying. There were six presenters. The presentations showed very clearly that bullying is a universal problem. Issues addressed by teachers at the school were similar to those at schools in the US. Bullying involves marginalization, humiliation, exclusion, blackmail, dehumanization, and ridicule. Given those characteristics I pointed out that racism was a form of bullying reminding the audience that almost every Peruvian has some African and indigenous blood running in their veins and as result have an obligation to aggressively confront racism. Racism, I stated, is a human rights issue and must be addressed accordingly. I ended the talk by referencing a speech

Robert Kennedy gave in South Africa: "Let no one be discouraged by the belief there is nothing one person can do against the enormous array of the world's ills, misery, ignorance, and violence. Few will have the greatness to bend history, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events. And in the total of all those acts will be written the history of a generation." Yes, each one should do their part. At the conclusion of the session *Santa Maria* officials presented gifts to every member of the UD team. In truth it was a day to remember.

Perhaps the high point of my entire visit to South America came at the *Collegio San Antonio Maranistas*. We arrived early that day almost a half-hour before our expected time. During a tour of the campus we were assigned to different teachers to go to different classes. I was assigned to a teacher who had a good command of English. We went into one of the classes. They were about thirty students in class. After the introductions he asked if I could speak about Africa or African-Americans. I was surprise because that was not on the agenda but it is always a joy to speak on either of those topics. He was an outstanding translator. Below is a transcript of my conversation that morning with the students:

Julius: When you hear of Africa, what comes to your mind?

Students: disease, poverty, sickness, violence

Julius: What is a country—is Peru a country?

Students: Peru is a country

Julius: There are 54 countries in Africa, and I am originally from Cameroon, one of the nations in Africa.

Julius: How many of you have ever heard of Cameroon?

Students: Cameroon plays good football. They have played against Peru

Julius: Cameroon won,---Right?

Students: No, No, [some laughter]

Julius: How many of you ever heard of the mineral “coltan”

Students: [no response]

Julius: Africa has over 70% of the world’s reserve of coltan

Julius: how many of you have a mobile phone, use computers, etc.

Students: [all raised their hand]

Julius: without coltan your mobile phone and computer will not work

[Everyone is so attentive---you can literally hear a pin drop]

Julius: Every time you use your phone, turn on a computer, or use any electronic such as play station, know that something from Africa is helping to make your life a little more comfortable

Julius: how many of you have ever heard of slavery?

Students: [all raised their hand]

Julius: What did slavery do—what comes to mind when you hear of slavery?

Students: Africa, Black people, etc.

Julius: let’s talk about scattering of black people, Black Diaspora, and the culture. Let’s talk about the culture of Afro-Peruvians

Students: yes, yes

Julius: let’s talk about the drums, flute, banjo, black eye peas, etc.

Students: [very attentive and focused]

Julius: I wish I can sing, but I can’t.

Students: sing, sing; just one song

Julius: my time is up. I thank you very much for listening to me

Students: [stood up and clapped. Standing ovation----]

(Julius to himself: Where is a video camera when one is needed? I love this country. I do not normally receive standing ovations when I speak.)

It is true as Thomas Wolfe wrote that going home again is like stepping into a river twice and one cannot step into the same river twice. I may never travel this road again, and even if I do it will be never be the same.

The experiences in Argentina and Peru point to the universality of human nature. Whatever one's economic background, we all work to create a good life for ourselves and community. Conversations with teachers confirm their goal to prepare students for life in a rapidly changing global environment. Whether at *Barracas*, *Fatima*, *Colegio Santa Maria*, and *Colegio Marianista* the message to students was identical. At Fatima where classes began at 5:30 P.M each weekday we saw a determined student body. Those who question the value of education should take a trip to Fatima and see the students at work. Education, wrote Frederick Douglass, is a "pathway to freedom." Indeed it is.

Colonialism & Impact

Any understanding of modern South America must recognize the impact of colonialism in the region. Spanish influence in South America did not stop with the end of colonialism. Political, economic, educational, and social structures are reflective of Spain's colonial legacy. Buenos Aires mirrors the large cities of Europe. Argentinians are quick to point out their European ancestry. My friend, Bille Victor, stated that Argentina suffers from an identity crisis because everyone is from somewhere else.

Estancia was a joy. Located about 100km from Buenos Aires, the ranch is a tourist attraction. Our group went horseback riding (I passed on it), tangoed, witnessed horse games,

and ate lots of beef. Argentina's main dish is beef and the ranch live up to it. The manager of the ranch was flamboyant, jovial, and had a contagious smile. He knew how to entertain a diverse group. He moved easily in different European languages. He said I was the first Cameroonian to visit the ranch and that gave me an opening to remind him of what the Cameroon football (soccer) team did to Argentina almost twenty years ago. Cameroon defeated Argentina in a World cup game, and *Diego Maradona*, Argentina's all-time super star and one of the world's best played in that game. Argentineans couldn't believe what had happened, and here comes this Cameroonian to remind them of the loss. They even created a song for it and the manager invited all who remember those days to sing it and they did. Estancia was fun. But I have to move on.

Yet in Argentina there are things quite disturbing about government policy towards indigenous people. Indians continue to lead on the misery index. The situation is different in Peru where attempts have been made to rehabilitate indigenous culture. While Indian artifacts are on display, indigenous people lack access to the power.

During our Lima walks a tour guide informed me that there is a lot of racism in Peru against blacks and indigenous people. He recounted an event when an indigenous person was denied access into a movie theatre because he had on traditional clothes. The guide stated that television shows, advertisements on billboards, and publicly displayed things are dominated by people of European descent. Racism remains a major social problem in Peru.

At Cusco I was introduced to significant components of Indian culture: temples, religious sites, and artifacts. Edgar, our tour guide, was a master at his craft pointing in detail to the complexities of indigenous culture, and ways by which they resisted oppression. A high point of the experience was the trip to Machu Picchu, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. This is where a good portion of Inca building structure is preserved. Standing there reminded me of Elie

Wiesel's assessment of modernity when he delivered the inaugural address at the formal inauguration of the Humanities Building at the University of Dayton. On that day he praised modern inventions but added that those successes are tempered by the viciousness of slavery, colonialism, racism, fascism, environmental destruction, and the development of weapons of mass destruction. It is even truer today as we look at the flashpoints: Syria, refugees, hunger, environmental destruction, and so on.

Machu Picchu is a jewel. Our tour guide emphasized the role of the sun in Inca culture. The Incas designed life based on the sun. The sunrise was spectacular. I met people who did the four days and three nights Inca Trail. There was the young female student from Texas who told us she recently did it. She was returning from the Inca Gate with her mother and reassured us that we were close to it. We needed that. We had already taken too many breaks and it was time to get there. Soon as we looked up, there it was. Alleluia! "Is that it? Is that what all the farce is about," a colleague said. It was exhilarating. We took pictures, made small talk, listened to a tour guide talk about his craft, and then headed back. The Incas were a great people, we said.

Meaning of Experience

This experience enriched my classes in several ways as it provided me with a more nuanced way to discuss topics of race, power, and class in a larger global context. Now I have access to new websites, and photographs, colleagues in the southern hemisphere, and an urgency to learn Spanish.

I was intrigued by the manner in which identity was showcased in South America. At the Marianist schools in both countries visitors were greeted by large photographs or statues of the

Rev. Father William Chaminade, the Virgin Mary, and other religious symbols. The experience was a reminder of the power and role of identity in history.

A particularly important aspect of foreign travel is an ability to be flexible and a willingness to challenge oneself to become immersed. This trip was not different. We were relaxed, challenged, and at times pushed to the brink. Occasionally we were tense. Whether at the alumni dinner at a fancy restaurant in Lima, or taking a walk through Chinatown, or terrified by stories of unsafe taxis in Lima, or navigating a menu in a restaurant, or high fiving each other about how well we were doing, or making faces after tasting strange food, it was all part of the experience. Conversations across race and class lines were equally important. Taken in isolation each event does not mean much but together they tell us about our ability to endure, adapt, tolerate, and adjust to changing realities. Those are the skills demanded of us as we work and function in an increasingly multicultural world. Acquiring those skills, I think, is the hallmark of a foreign experience.

Discovering new sites, venturing into areas tagged unsuitable for tourists, getting lost, visiting with local people, enjoying a local sporting activity, shopping in the local market, visiting a local joint, and enjoying and dancing to the local music are things which make immersion possible. They help us to realize our capacity to change. That, indeed, is the difference between immersion and tourism. As I departed from South America I can rightfully say I took a little bit of that region back with me.

And I must devote a paragraph to food in Peru. The variation of food in Peru points to the diversity of that society. Peruvian cuisine is a combination of indigenous, African, and European influence. How does food inform our understanding of a people's culture? In *The Historian's Craft* Marc Bloch argues that whatever people have touched, developed, and made tells us

something about their history. Food will be a great way to study Peruvian history. At the alumni dinner Luis F. Garrido explained to me the variation of Peruvian food. Those were among the moments I appreciated to be a part of UD culture and community. All the alumni present were friendly and genuine. I hated that we could not honor their lunch invitation but time was no longer at our side when we met. We were scheduled to depart from Lima soon after our meeting. I will remember their friendship, kindness, and grace.

The trip to South America was about human understanding. We were reminded that words are meaningless unless contextualized within space and time. For example at Estancia the manager repeatedly referred to my Cameroonian background as “exotic.” Yet the meaning of that word over there is different from what it is the US. We were reminded of the interconnectedness of human nature and that we inhabit the same earth. The Rev Martin Luther King Jr. wrote: “Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.” Human relations transcend national and continental boundaries. And in a 2013 speech in Berlin US President Barack Obama affirmed: “And the greatest tribute you can pay to those who came before us is by carrying their work to pursue peace and justice not only in our countries but for all mankind.” The trip to South America reinforced that notion.